

SKILL2E: Online Reflection for Intercultural Competence Gain

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The project SKILL2E aims to equip students on international work placements with intercultural competences. The model proposes a double loop learning cycle in which a shared online diary using guided questions is used for reflection. Preliminary results illustrate how this collaborative approach is conducive to the development of intercultural competences.

1. Introduction

According to Rundstrom (2005) the skills to compete in a global market differ from those needed even 15 years ago and must empower graduates with new skills in an increasingly educated population. In other research, McAllister et al. (2006) discuss how the necessity in which “[p]rofessionals are increasingly being required to work in diverse, multicultural environments. Accordingly, skills in intercultural practice are a prerequisite to professional knowledge and competence. Ensuring that these are developed is increasingly part of the core business of universities.” McCabe (2001) has pointed out that even though the number and scope of student study abroad programs is ever increasing, that competence regarding intercultural awareness needs to be planned for demonstrable outcomes. McAllister *et al.* (2006) have stated that most professionals need to be able to work with people from very diverse cultures, and thus, “culturally specific competence has limited utility in most modern professional contexts.” Therefore, one of today’s educational challenges is assisting students to develop an awareness that transcends specific culture knowledge and develop intercultural competence applicable on a global level. Although students do international work placements and experience cultural differences, if there is no conscious reflection regarding these experiences, meaningful learning does not occur. As a result, one of the important pillars of the SKILL2E concept is an on-line platform for reflection to develop intercultural awareness.

2. Theoretical Framework for Intercultural Competence

There are several definitions of intercultural competence; Fitzgerald (2001) identifies intercultural general competence as more of a context-bound, practice-based, awareness, knowledge, attitude and skills concept. Moving one step further, Deardorff (2009) defines intercultural competence in terms of its outcome: “The overall external outcome of intercultural competence is defined as the effective and appropriate behaviour and communication in intercultural situations, which again can be further detailed in terms of appropriate behaviour in specific contexts (appropriate behaviour being assessed by the other involved in the interaction).”

3. The SKILL2E Model

Vande Berg (2001) indicates that in today's world of higher education, demonstrated outcomes and applicability to the real world are vital to the sustainment of academic programs. Thus, the Deardorff (2006/2009) model seems well suited in the context of the SKILL2E concept with its intended strategic interventions before, during and after the internship abroad. This presupposes the necessity of defining specific measurable learning outcomes in order to make assessment possible and valid. The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) addresses the issues raised in the SKILL2E project as it provides an explanation of the stages a person moves through in the process of intercultural competence acquisition. For Bennett (1993), moving through the stages, from ethnocentric to ethnorelative is associated with personal growth and must be seen as multidimensional. The Intercultural Development Inventory (IDC) maps out this development in stages from denial, polarisation, minimisation, acceptance to adaptation. This development, therefore, involves one's thinking, feeling and acting. In the final stage of the IDC, adaptation, the intercultural interaction is effective and appropriate in specific contexts and for specific situations. In the SKILL2E concept it is an achievement if participants display a change after the internship and the associated SKILL2E interventions with respect to the stages the DMIS and IDC delineate.

The complete SKILL2E model therefore follows a concept that regards intercultural competence as an on-going process which is reflected in the following figure.

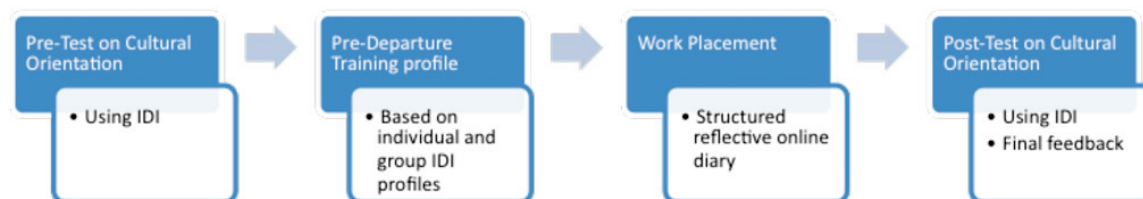


Figure 1

The SKILL2E concept incorporates an initial assessment stage using the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI). This helps pinpoint the current state of the intercultural development orientation of the students. The second step, pre-departure training, is based on the IDI scores. The training should guarantee that all intervention strategies consider the stage-appropriate mindset. The learning outcomes for the training need to be tailored to the specific stage students are in but should always in-

clude a move up the IDC towards the intercultural mindset. The third step is the actual work placement abroad and the online reflection. The final step is the reassessment of an expected intercultural competence gain.

3.1. The Reflection Platform: Interflection

As cultural self-awareness in its widest sense forms a key constituent of intercultural competence, it is vital to provide opportunities for the project participants to acquire, intensify and most importantly, practice this skill. According to Deardorff (2009) "It is therefore important to provide opportunities for project participants to reflect upon and assess the development of their own intercultural competence. In the SKILL2E case, the online communication scenario "Interflection" provides the framework for guided self-reflection during the work placement. In the SKILL2E model, a set of guided questions are the focal point of the diary which permits the students to reflect upon their impressions, observations, and experiences. According to Argyris et al. (1985) and Schon (1987), this double loop learning is essential to the redesign of social structures as well as human action. These strategic interventions enable reiterated conscious decisions with respect to trialling context-appropriate behaviour (active experimentation) during the transnational placement (concrete experience).

The use of computer supported collaborative learning (CSCL) for the diary is essential to support individual as well as group learning by fostering interaction and the willingness to com-

municate. According to Stahl *et al.* (2006) "Computer support for intersubjective meaning making is what makes the field unique." This attempt to help students make meaning of their in-

teractions in a new culture is done gradually as the diary starts with tasks that collect visual impressions of other cultures and progresses with questions of increasing profoundness. These questions are based on the cultural dimensions identified by Hofstede (1981/2010) and are directly related to the experiences of the participants on their placements. Students can see and share responses to the questions. This is done to attempt to reach more multifaceted views triggered by the questions. The tasks allow for self-monitoring and facilitate the theory of the

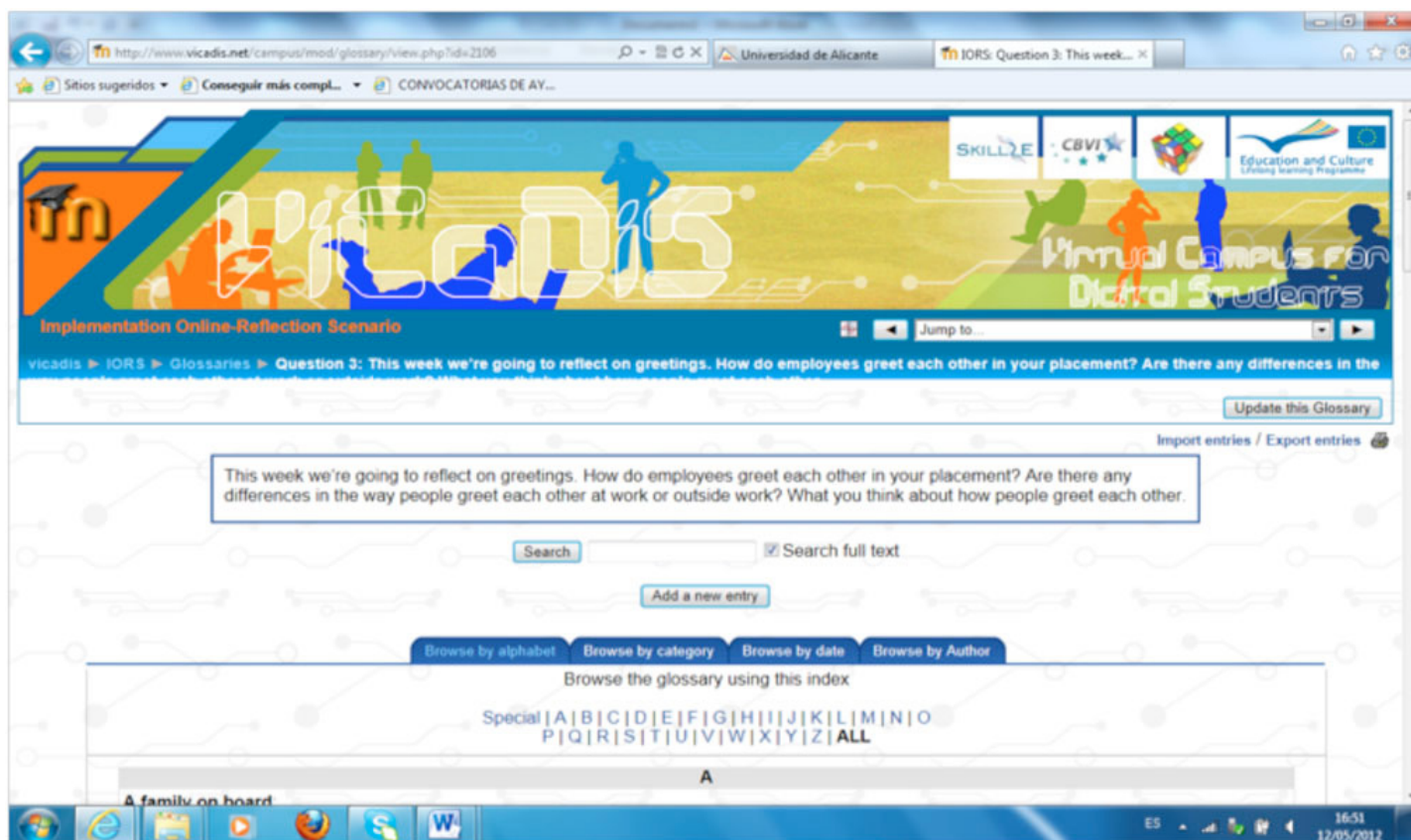


Figure 2: Reflection Platform and sample question

pre-departure training to be integrated into their daily practice. The other available tools, such as forums, promotes collaborative learning which also aides in the acculturation of the participants into the intercultural awareness learning community by constructing new knowledge in a social context.

Intercultural competence gain is a complex issue and is best done in authentic contexts, consequently, the diary moves the students past a single loop learning cycle and into a double loop learning cycle by using the diary to move beyond mere description and show meta-reflection on the issues to develop awareness of the invisible boundaries (Carroll 1988, Spencer-Oatey 2001) of values, beliefs and attitudes in intercultural communication. The application of this reflection is then applied in situations of the new culture where finally real change in the cultural mindsets of the participants can take place.

4. Conclusion

The SKILL2E concept is based on double loop learning where the learning outcomes must be verifiable. In the case of “soft skills”,

such as intercultural competence, this requires innovative approaches. Interflection, the reflection platform, gives the students a way to individually and collaboratively reflect on their experiences in an environment which provides the opportunity to make meaning out of actions, experiences and then apply this to their new cultural environment for intercultural competence gain. This gain is measured by the use of the IDI before and after the work placement. In short, the SKILL2E concept provides the participants with a new model for a sustainable and accountable intercultural competence gain.

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